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ORIGIN OF THE TITLE SUPERINTENDENT OF FINANCE

ON Wednesday, February 7, 1781, the Continental Congress agreed to the organization of a department of finance; and they gave to the chief officer of that department the title "superintendant of finance". It is well known that a few days later (February 20) Robert Morris of Philadelphia was named by unanimous consent to take charge of the department under the new title. Accepting the place with some hesitation on May 14, he took the oath of office late in the following June, thus making his position formally complete. The position he held until November 1, 1784—for a period of more than three years. No such officer succeeded him, for the finances of the Confederation were soon after managed by a board.¹

The title Superintendent of Finance as borne by Morris remained unique in American history. No one has thus far given special attention to its origin. Surmises on the subject have, it is true, been made.² Probably the most remarkable statement regarding the title stands in a single paragraph at the very opening of Professor W. G. Sumner's well-known work on Morris, a paragraph that by its vigor and decision challenges attention. "The only man in the history of the world", remarks Professor Sumner, "who ever bore the title . . . was Robert Morris . . . the office which he filled has never had a parallel."³ Apparently then the title and the office were a happy inspiration of the Congress of 1780 or 1781. The point of view will serve to direct a brief inquiry into the probable source of the title of 1781.

No fact in American history is more easily authenticated than that of the wide-spread enthusiasm for France which took possession of this country as soon as the alliance of February, 1778, was known to have been established. The slightest familiarity with the newspapers from 1778 to 1783 makes this clear. This en-

¹ *Journals of Congress*, VII, 29, 30, 38, 79, 87, 96, IX, 169, 179, X, 7, 216, XIII, 106-107; Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *Robert Morris, Patriot and Financier*, 76; Francis Wharton, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, IV, 297-299, 330-333, 379-380, 412-414, 470-471, 505-506.

² Albert S. Bolles, *The Financial History of the United States*, I, 110; J. C. Guggenheim, "The Development of the Executive Departments, 1775-1789", in *Essays in the Constitutional History of the United States* (edited by J. F. Jameson), 147, 154, note 3, 155. Both writers suggest that the title may be French in origin.

³ William G. Sumner, *The Financier and the Finances of the Revolution*, I, 1.

thusiasm for France asserted itself in America at a time when the chief and almost overpowering problem was that of establishing a new form of government, a government that should be strong in structure and capable above all things of being successfully administered. This was indeed the one great practical problem of the Revolutionary as well as of the following epoch. Whatever form the government should ultimately assume, it was clear to a few constructive and liberal minds—to such men as Hamilton, Franklin, Jay, Robert Morris, and, let us add to the list, Pelatiah Webster of Philadelphia—that a sound government must rest on a well-administered national system of finance.

The various committees and boards that had attempted to direct financial matters since June 3, 1775, had proved inadequate. The committees sometimes lacked ability. Moreover the committee and board system was bound to lack real vigor, a fact that Robert Morris appreciated as early as 1776 when he wrote to the Committee of Secret Correspondence that "if the Congress mean to succeed in this contest, they must pay good executive men to do their business as it ought to be, and not lavish millions away by their own mismanagement".¹ That Congress was soon ready to consider foreign methods of administering the finances, if it could by so doing bring order into the government and strengthen the credit, is clear enough. The very year of the French alliance they made a direct appeal to Dr. Richard Price, the well-known English writer on finance and a warm friend to the Revolutionary cause, to come to America and help reorganize the continental finances.² Early in the following year Congress resolved to urge its European agents to inquire into any methods known abroad of administering departments of war, treasury, naval, and other offices.³ But nothing came of these efforts. When by the spring of 1780 Congress was considering the project of placing Morris at the head of a department of finance, they were doubtless moved by a conviction that was wide-spread—in brief that the only hope for the continental finances, and so for the progress of the war and the ultimate establishment of a strong government, lay in the appointment of trustworthy, capable "heads" of administration, men outside of Congress and responsible to it.

Perhaps the most famous expression of this conviction is Alexander Hamilton's. In the autumn of 1780 he declared to James Duane that "Congress should instantly appoint" a secretary of foreign affairs, a president of war, a president of marine, a financier,

¹ Peter Force, *American Archives*, fifth series, III, 1241 (December 16, 1776).

² Wharton, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, II, 474, 756.

³ *Secret Journals of Congress*, II, 130 (January 25, 1779).

and a president of trade. That Hamilton had his eye upon French administration is clear from his remark that "these officers should have nearly the same powers and functions as those in France analogous to them".¹ But neither Hamilton's writings nor the arid pages of the *Journals of Congress* give more than very vague suggestions of foreign influence, French influence in particular, working on American minds.

The principle of one-man rule in the executive offices had won its way to results when in January and February, 1781, Congress resolved to appoint three secretaries—for foreign affairs, war, and marine—and a "superintendant of finance". The organization of the department of finance was outlined, it will be remembered, on February 7; and that day marked the adoption of the title.²

Close scrutiny of American newspapers and pamphlets between 1778 and 1781 leads to the conclusion that the title Superintendent of Finance was first employed with a sense of its applicability to an American officer by Pelatiah Webster of Philadelphia. In February, 1780—exactly a year before Congress placed on its records the title Superintendent of Finance—Webster declared in print "that a suitable person for the great office of *Financier-General*, or *Superintendent of Finance*, should be looked up, and appointed as soon as may be."³ In order to bring Webster's usage of the title into fuller significance a word should be given to Webster's career.

A Yale graduate in 1746, Pelatiah Webster began work as a clergyman. After about ten years, however, he turned his energies to mercantile business, settled in Philadelphia, and there accumulated a fortune. What leisure he could get he devoted to reading and study, especially in the field of finance and trade. His patriotic zeal carried him far along in his favorite studies. As early as 1776 he began to write for the purpose of helping to solve some of the intricate financial and trade problems already confronting Congress and the country. His collected writings, a volume of well-known essays published four years before his death, are a sure record of his ability, his knowledge of national finance, and his insight into various problems of governmental administration. One may reasonably say that Webster was the maturest American writer on the subject of trade and finance in the epoch of the Revolution. Madison recognized his ability in 1781 and paid a tribute to it later. And

¹ *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, edited by Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal edition, 1904), I, 225, 226.

² *Journals of Congress*, VII, 11-12, 16, 23-25, 29.

³ *Political Essays* (Philadelphia, 1791), 90-91. The original statement appeared February 10, 1780.

it is well known that Webster was consulted from time to time by members of the Continental Congress.¹

Like many loyal Americans, Webster was deeply interested in the French alliance. The next year (August, 1779), considering the subject of trade and finance, he wrote: "A good *financier* is as rare as a *phœnix*, there is but here and there one appears in an age, yet in our present circumstances, a good financier is as necessary as a general, for the one cannot be supported without the other".² He touched upon the same theme in January, 1780. "In the appointment of an officer of the revenue, or expenditures of the public monies . . . it is necessary", he remarked, "most essentially necessary, that he should be a man of known *industry, economy, and thriftiness in his own private affairs.*" And he went on to "propose, that a *financier or comptroller of finances*, be appointed, whose sole object and business should be to superintend the finances. . . . If a man adequate to this business could be found, I conceive his appointment would be of the highest utility . . . as we may easily conceive only by imagining the benefits which might have resulted from such an appointment, had such an one been made five years ago."³ Financial management must be "the work of *one mind*"—such was Webster's repeated advice.⁴ The following month he employed for the first time in print the title Superintendent of Finance. And throughout the year 1780 Webster's pen was busy on matters pertaining to trade and finance.

Within the fortnight preceding the organization of a department of finance there appeared in consecutive numbers of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 24 and 31, 1781, two essays by Webster.⁵ In the second essay the author once more tried among other things to enforce the need of placing "men of genius, abilities, integrity and industry" over executive departments. The first essay bore the significant title, "A DISSERTATION on the Nature, Authority and Uses of the Office of a FINANCIER-GENERAL, or SUPERINTENDANT OF THE FINANCES." In it Webster remarked that the office of a Financier-General or "Superintendant" had for some time been contemplated. While the subject was comparatively a new one in America, he had, he added, thought much about it. Then he pro-

¹ The chief facts in Webster's life are given in Professor Franklin B. Dexter's *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College*, II, 97-102, including a list of all of Webster's known essays and pamphlets. Madison's tribute will be found in *The Madison Papers* (ed. Gilpin), II, 706-707. See also Webster's *Political Essays*, 116, note, 189.

² *Ibid.*, 49.

³ *Ibid.*, 69, 72-73, 88-89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72, 170-171, 268.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 152-161, 162-171.

ceeded to define the duties of such an office very much as they were defined a fortnight later by Congress. He concluded a part of his essay by saying: "this office does not interfere with any other offices of the revenue or expenditures; such as the office of Treasurer or Treasury Board, Auditor of Accounts, &c. &c. This office begins where they end." In brief, Webster's conception of the office was that of a great minister of finance, a veritable Superintendent of the Finances, for in the same essay he wrote: "A good Financier is much the rarest character to be found of any in the great departments of state. France has had but three in four hundred years, viz. the Duke of Sully, under Henry IV. Colbert, under Louis XIV. and Mr. Neckar. England has not had one since Queen Elizabeth's time." Recalling the titles of Colbert and Necker as *contrôleur-général* and *directeur-général* respectively, one is led by a process of elimination straight to the conclusion that Webster's "Superintendent" was probably suggested by Sully's title of *superintendant des finances*.

Both essays, one might readily conjecture, were written to help forward a plodding and limping Congress, for very soon after their appearance the leading suggestions in these essays were put into force. Webster was, so far as I am aware, the single writer who during 1780-1781 used the title with a view to its applicability to an American officer. Whether or not he suggested the title to Congress—and there is no express evidence regarding the matter—there can be no reasonable doubt that the title was associated by Webster and his contemporaries with the Duke of Sully.

Why under the circumstances of 1780 should not Americans—at least American students of finance and well-read statesmen—catch at the name of Sully and to some extent inform themselves of the man whose name had become a byword indicative of capacity in reestablishing his country's finances at a critical stage? A hundred and twenty years before Robert Morris was named American Superintendent of Finance, Louis XIV, in September, 1661, dismissed Nicolas Fouquet from the French office of *superintendant* or *surintendant des finances*.¹ And at that time the French title was suppressed. The title had come to designate the chief financial minister of the administration. It had been the official title of numerous figures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but among these no man had been abler or more conspicuous in his generation by his ability and afterward through his *Mémoires* than Maximilien de Béthune, Baron de Rosny and Duc de Sully. For some twelve

¹ The form *superintendant* was the usual one until the seventeenth century. Then it was gradually superseded by the contracted *surintendant*.

years, from 1599 till after the death of Henry IV, Sully served in the capacity of superintendent. He succeeded so well in establishing the monarchy on a surer economic and political basis that in the course of time he came to be readily cited as the example of a statesman who at a critical epoch not only saved his country from wreckage, but introduced measures which later French statesmen and others could not ignore. In fact Sully was the single really great figure in the French superintendency.¹

France in the eighteenth century took a new interest in the Duke of Sully. Falling rents, overtaxation, and financial embarrassment, the commercial struggle with Great Britain—all these matters led thoughtful statesmen about the middle of the century to seek to formulate the laws of national prosperity. As a matter of course the days of Henry IV and the financial expedients of Henry's great superintendent came to mind. The *économistes* quoted Sully. Literary men wrote essays upon him. In the latter half of the century his name was heard with some frequency in French political songs and popular epigrams. Even Louis XV and members of the court circle read Sully's writings.²

In 1745 Sully's *Mémoires* appeared, recast and simplified by the Abbé Pierre Mathurin de l'Écluse des Loges. There were at least a dozen French editions of this work by 1781. Translated into English ten years later (1755), in its English dress it ran through some ten editions by the same time.³ There was in John Adams's library

¹ There is no detailed study of the origin and development of the French superintendency in existence. Altogether the most notable article on the subject is Arthur de Boislisle's "Semblançay et la Surintendance des Finances", in *Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de France*, 1881, 225-274. Valuable glimpses of the office will be found in the *Économies Royales* of Sully (vols. XVI and XVII in Michaud's *Nouvelle Collection des Mémoires relatifs à l'Histoire de France*, Paris, 1857; *Lettres, Instructions et Mémoires de Colbert* (ed. Pierre Clément, Paris, 7 vols., 1861-1870), especially vol. II; P. Clément, *Histoire de la Vie et de l'Administration de Colbert* (Paris, 1846), introductory chapter, 1-70; *Écrits Inédits de Saint-Simon* (ed. A. P. Faugère, Paris, 8 vols., 1880-1893).

² *Mémoires et Journal Inédit du Marquis d'Argenson* (Bibliothèque Elzevirienne, Paris, 5 vols., 1857-1858), II, 76-77, V, 10-11; *Mémoires du Duc de Luynes sur la Cour de Louis XV (1735-1758)* (ed. by L. Dussieux and E. Soulié, Paris, 17 vols., 1860-1865), VII, 99. A typical use of Sully was made by François Quesnay in the famous *Tableau Économique* (1758), pp. 3-6 of the facsimile reproduction issued for the British Economic Association in 1894. A widely-read essay from the pen of Antoine Léonard Thomas, later a member of the French Academy, was entitled *Éloge de Marinmilién de Béthune, Duc de Sully, Surintendant des Finances, principal Ministre sous Henri IV.*; it was published at Lyons in 1763, was soon translated into Swedish and German, and was reprinted in Richard de Bury's *Histoire de la Vie de Henri IV* (3d ed., 1779). For references to Sully of a popular nature, see *Chansonnier Historique du XVIII^e Siècle* (ed. Émile Raunié, Paris, 10 vols., 1879-1884), vols. VIII, IX, X, *passim*. For a further bibliography of Sully, see *La Grande Encyclopédie*, s. v. Sully.

³ Based on Quérard, Brunet, Graesse, and catalogues of the large libraries.

a French edition of 1767, portions of which he had certainly read before the American Revolution.¹ Washington had in his library an English edition of 1778 in six volumes.² No doubt many Americans were familiar with Sully through these *Memoirs*. There was in the volumes no more interesting passage than the long description of the qualities essential to a capable finance minister, including a detailed account of Sully's management of the organization of his day while he acted as superintendent of the French finances.³

There appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal* of November 8, 1780—three months before Congress outlined its department of finance—a brief paragraph addressed to the editor (Mr. Bradford), and signed “A. B.” The paragraph read:

The following Account of the state of France, when the Duke of SULLY, in the reign of Henry the fourth undertook the management of the finances of that kingdom, and of the conduct of that great Minister, may afford some useful instruction to your readers.

“The standing revenues brought into the King's coffers, no more than *Thirty Millions*, though *One Hundred and Fifty Millions* were raised on the people; so great were the abuses of that government in raising money; and they were not less in the dispensation of it. SULLY beheld this state of things, when he came to have the sole superintendency of affairs, with horror. He was ready to despair; but he did not despair. Zeal for his Master, zeal for his Country, and this very State seemingly so desperate, animated his endeavours; and THE NOBLEST THOUGHT, THAT EVER ENTERED INTO THE HEAD OF A MINISTER, ENTERED INTO HIS. He resolved to make, and he made, the REFORMATION OF ABUSES, the REDUCTION OF EXPENCES, and a FRUGAL MANAGEMENT, the sinking fund for the payment of the national debts, and the sufficient fund for all the great things he intended to do, without overcharging the people. He succeeded in all.

A. B.

From what source came this quotation? Who was “A. B.”? Was he Alexander Hamilton or James Duane, Pelatiah Webster or James Madison? Anonymous as the evidence is, it indicates clearly enough that a little while before Congress organized its department of finance, the Duke of Sully was in men's minds.

How easy it was to look upon Sully as the great exemplar of Morris is made sufficiently clear from the correspondence of Presi-

¹ Through Mr. Arthur Adams of Boston my attention was directed to the French *Mémoires* of Sully (8 vols., 1767) once owned by John Adams and now in the Boston Public Library. The earlier volumes are annotated in John Adams's hand. Cf. *The Works of John Adams* (ed. C. F. Adams, 10 vols., 1850-1856), IX, 404.

² W. C. Lane's inventory of Washington's library in the appendix to *A Catalogue of the Washington Collection in the Boston Athenaeum* (1897), 514.

³ *Mémoires de Sully* (1747), I, 546-572. The passage in the English translation will be found in book X, II, 295-326 (ed. of 1763, 6 vols.).

dent Joseph Reed of Pennsylvania. Writing to his friend Searle in the spring of 1781, Reed commented on the recent action of Congress in appointing Morris "Minister" of finance. Then he added: "The task of restoring the finances of this country must be a very arduous one. A Sully should have a Henry to support him, but it may be doubted whether Sullys or Henrys are the growth of the present age."¹ In the autumn of the same year Reed held Morris up to General Nathanael Greene as a "pecuniary dictator". Reed considered that the "qualities" required for administering such a place as Morris held "were ability of mind, some money in hand, and a private credit for more. I believe I ought", he continued, "to have put the latter qualities first, for if Sully had been here without them, he would not have been thought of".² Coming from the president of the executive council of Pennsylvania, a man who had been in Congress and who knew, it is safe to assume, something about the secret proceedings of that body, these allusions are notable—all the more so if it is remembered that the Pennsylvania assembly and the Continental Congress met at this period under the same roof.³ Perhaps they were suggested by actual knowledge regarding Congressional discussions. It is, however, probable that they indicate simply that at the time Sully was the stock example of a great financier.

Philadelphia as the seat of government was especially likely to be touched by zeal for France. There Gérard for a short time, and after him Luzerne and his secretary, Marbois, for a longer period represented their country's interests. Luzerne in particular was a conspicuous and well-liked figure in Philadelphia society. He often entertained his fellow-countrymen, and on sundry occasions he gave tavern dinners to the members of the Continental Congress.⁴ As a matter of course after 1778 the French language was widely studied in America;⁵ and French books, as the booksellers' lists indicate, were read. Chastellux was pleased to find that French history afforded numerous topics for conversation in Philadelphia homes.⁶

Such circumstantial evidence, then, as can be found points unmistakably to the French origin of the American title Superintendent of Finance. It was associated at the time of its appearance in

¹ William B. Reed, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed* (Philadelphia, 2 vols., 1847), II, 296.

² *Ibid.*, 374.

³ François Jean Chastellux, *Travels in North-America in the Years 1780, 1781, and 1782* (2d ed., London, 2 vols., 1787), I, 226.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 187, note, 322–323, etc.

⁵ *The Works of John Adams*, VII, 173.

⁶ Chastellux, *Travels*, I, 309.

America with Sully, chief minister of Henry IV and for about twelve years the most capable occupant of the office known as *surintendant des finances*. The appearance of the title in 1780 helped mark that wide-spread zeal for France which after the alliance of 1778 involved almost all patriotic Americans. Moreover the title itself was one among many pieces of evidence which here and there in the eighteenth century revealed the new interest felt in the work and writings of the Duke of Sully. Somehow Sully's title gained Congressional attention, and in a form slightly altered from the French was adopted. It was not popular, and was never used in law after Morris's resignation of the office in 1784. It went the way of many another doctrinaire suggestion, for such, in truth, it was.

HENRY BARRETT LEARNED.